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Obama and McCain Are Both Wrong **by Sheldon Richman**

Barack Obama's call for talks with "our enemies" is shaping up as a major bone of contention between him and John McCain in the presidential campaign. As usual, both the Democrat and the Republican get it wrong.

Obama says he would sit down with so-called adversaries such as Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Cuban President Raul Castro, and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to talk out their differences. Although somewhat vague, he emphasizes that such talks should be held with few conditions. As his website puts it, "Obama is willing to meet with the leaders of all nations, friend and foe. He will do the careful preparation necessary, but will signal that America is ready to come to the table, and that he is willing to lead."

McCain has slammed Obama, arguing that his position shows his "inexperience and reckless judgment."

How can both be wrong?

McCain and Obama are wrong because they operate from the imperial premise that virtually anything that goes on in the world is the business of the U.S. government.

McCain, whose hero is the belligerent nationalist Theodore Roosevelt, embraces a policy of confrontation with "our enemies" — i.e., foreign governments that have never threatened to attack the United States. He enthusiastically supported the invasion of Iraq, and his attitude toward Iran was made clear when he sang, "Bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb Iran." No doubt he would apply the same "what we say goes" policy to Cuba, Venezuela, North Korea, China, Russia, and any other country that did not pay sufficient deference to America's "leadership."

That, of course, is a recipe for perpetual conflict, cold and hot, which for obvious reasons is contrary to the interests of most Americans, whose well-being depends on peace and free trade.

Does that mean Obama's policy of negotiation is the right one? No. Ironically, McCain asks the right question, "What should we talk about?" What indeed?

What would be the agenda of a meeting between President Obama and President Ahmadinejad? Perhaps Obama wants to talk about the allegations that Iran trains Iraqi insurgents

and supplies explosives that kill American troops. (We'll accept those charges for the sake of argument.) What's to talk about? The surest way to prevent Iran from aiding attacks on American forces is to withdraw those forces. No talks are needed.

This brings up a larger issue, Iran's relationship with Iraq. Why is that any business of the United States? An American president should no more be meddling in that relationship than an Iranian president should meddle in the relationship between the United States and Mexico. It's Iran's neighborhood, not the United States'. How would McCain or Obama react if Ahmadinejad issued a suitably revised Monroe Doctrine?

The American ambition to manage Iran's dealings with Iraq is ludicrous, considering how much it has messed up in the past. After Iraq attacked Iran in 1980, the Reagan administration sided with Saddam Hussein. Later, in the Iran-Contra affair, it sold arms to the Islamic Republic. Then, in 2003, the U.S. government removed the barrier to Iranian dominance in the region by toppling Saddam's regime and helping to install a government with close ties to Iran. When will U.S. presidents learn to leave well enough alone?

What about Iran's supposed ambitions to become a nuclear power? There is no reason to see that as a threat to the American people. The value to Iran of nuclear weapons in the Middle East would be to deter attacks from the United States and Israel, which right now is the nuclear monopolist in the region. The lesson of Iraq is not lost on them. Would the United States have attacked if Saddam had had a nuke?

The best course for the American people is to withdraw from the Middle East and let the parties find their own way to accommodation. Contrary to McCain, the alternative to talking is not confrontation. It's nonintervention, free trade, and peace.

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